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ABSTRACT

A number of studies have found evidence suggesting that being a witness to violence puts a child at risk of developing social and psychological problems. However, most of these studies used populations of severely battered women and did not control for confounding with other family characteristics. This study analyzed male and female responses (N=6,002) of the 1985 National Family Violence Survey using an analysis of covariance to control for confounding variables including physical attacks on the child, gender, age, and family socioeconomic status. The study also analyzed whether the child witnessed violence by the father, the mother, or by both. The results demonstrated a link between witnessing marital violence with various psycho-social problems including health problems, feelings of depression and stress, increased drug abuse, use of coercion and violence in marital conflict, child abuse, and engaging in violence and other criminal behavior outside the family. Results suggest that being a witness to violence between parents puts a child at risk for a number of serious mental health and other problems, and that this applies to children of all socioeconomic levels and regardless of whether the child has also been attacked by the parents. (CM)

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CHILDREN AS WITNESS TO MARITAL VIOLENCE: A RISK FACTOR FOR LIFE LONG PROBLEMS AMONG A NATIONALLY REPRESENTATIVE SAMPLE OF AMERICAN MEN AND WOMEN

Murray A. Straus, Ph.D

The National Family Violence Surveys conducted in 1975 and 1985 [1 2 3] indicate that:

* Each year more than 10 million American children witness a physical assault between their parents. In two thirds of the cases, this is repeated violence between the parents.

* Witnessing violence between parents is highly stressful and is a risk factor for a variety of psycho-social problems, including

  Health and mental health problems
  Drinking and drug use
  Marital conflict and violence
  Physical abuse of children
  Assaults and other crime outside the family

The space available permits only results from the 1985 National Family Violence Survey to be presented (N=6,002), but the findings of the two surveys are parallel. Moreover, the findings to be reported are also consistent with clinical studies, experimental analog studies, and smaller scale epidemiological studies. [4 5]

INCIDENCE AND PREVALENCE RATES

Witnessing violence was measured by asking respondents whether, during their teen years, their father had hit their mother and how often, and whether the mother had hit their father and how often. The entire original questionnaire is reprinted in Intimate Violence.[1]

About one in eight of the men and women (12.6%) in this survey recalled at least one instances in which their parents engaged in physical violence. Of those who did recall such instances, the mean number of times was 8.9 and the median 4. Figure 1 shows that the father was the only violent parent in half the cases, both parents were violent in 31% of the cases, and the mother was the only one to hit in 19% of the families.

(Figure 1 about here)

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These are minimum estimates because most parents try to avoid physical fights when the children are present, and because some incidents undoubtedly occurred earlier in life and were forgotten. Interviews with the parents themselves revealed an annual incidence of "only" 16%, i.e. about 10 million children and a prevalence rate of 30%, [1 3] and those are also minimum estimates. Thus, the childhood prevalence data indicates that at least a third of American children have witnessed violence between their parents, and most have endured repeated instances of these painful and distressing events.

VIOLENCE BETWEEN PARENTS AND PSYCHOSOCIAL PROBLEMS OF CHILDREN

Although being a witness to violence may be distressing to children, that does not necessarily mean there are lasting harmful effects. Moreover, investigating the effects of witnessing parental violence is complicated by the fact that parental violence is confounded with other variables that are known to have adverse effects such as poverty and child abuse. Figure 2, for example [6] shows that parents who physically attack each other are also much more likely to physically abuse a child than are other parents.

(Figure 2 about here)

In view of the confounding of witnessing violence with other variables, the hypothesized adverse effect of witnessing parental violence was tested using analysis of covariance. The covariate used to control for attacks on the child was measured by questions which asked "Thinking about when you yourself were a teenager, about how often would you say your mother or stepmother used physical punishment, like slapping or hitting you. Think about the year this happened the most." The response categories ranged from Never (0) though More Then 20 Times (7).

It is astonishing that 58% of the men and 44% of the women in this national survey could remember having been hit by a parent when they were in they were teenagers. Since, as was shown in Figure 2, children who observed their parents hitting each other are more likely to have also been victims of violence by a parent, controlling for having been a victim is essential. Nonetheless, the specific measure used for that purpose does not entirely eliminate the confounding of being a witness to and being a victim of violence by parents because the questions refer to being hit during the teen years; whereas the peak years for hitting children are ages three and four, when more than 90% of all American children are victims of violence at the hands of parents.[7]

Three other variables were controlled in the analysis of covariance: the gender of the respondent, the age of the respondent, and the score of the family on a socioeconomic status index. In addition, the analysis also specifies whether the child witnessed violence by the father, by the mother, or by both. Table 1 shows the net effect of witnessing violence between parents after adjusting for these four covariates.

(Table 1 about here)

Health Problems

Part A of Table 1 shows that respondents who witnessed violence between their parents during their adolescence rated their health as slightly worse on a scale ranging from 0 (poor) to 4 (excellent). They also tended to spend slightly more time in bed due to illness and had a slightly higher score on a somatic symptoms index, but the differences between those who witnessed violence and those who did not were not statistically significant for those two measures.

Mental Health Problems

Part B of Table 1 shows that respondents who recalled witnessing violence during their teens tended to be higher on a depressive symptoms index and higher on a measure of feeling stressed than did the other respondents in this survey.

Drinking And Drugs

The first row of section C in Table 1 shows that men who witnessed violence between their parents had a much higher incidence of drunkenness than did other men. The second row of section C shows that women who witnessed such violence also had a higher rate of problem drinking, but the difference was not quite statistically significant.

As for using drugs, the last two rows of section C shows much higher frequency of drug use by respondents who witnessed violence. The drug use rate is especially high among those whose mothers assaulted their fathers.

Marital Conflict And Abuse

Section D of Table 1 shows statistically significant effects of witnessing violence for all five measures of martial conflict and abuse. However, the differences in respect to the amount of conflict are minimal and show slightly more marital conflict among those who did not witness violence between their parents. This is not altogether surprising because conflict is inevitable in marriage, as in all human association. The crucial issue is not so much whether there is conflict but whether coercion and violence are used to prevail in a conflict. The other rows of section D show that coercion and violence are used much more often by those who have witnessed violence between their parents.

Rows two through five of section D show a much higher rate of both verbal and physical violence against spouses by those who have witnessed physical assaults between their parents.

The "severe violence" index in the last row of section D differs from the "any violence" measure in the preceding two rows because it measures attacks that carry a greater risk of injury, such as punching, kicking, and

assaults with objects; whereas most of the violence in the "any violence" measure falls into the slapping and plate throwing level of severity. If severe violence index is taken as approximating what the public calls "wife beating," it can be seen that the rate of wife beating is substantially greater for men who observed violence by parents, and especially if their mother was also violent.

Child Abuse

Section E of Table 1 shows that parents who witnessed violence between their own parents tend to be much more likely to verbally and physically abuse their own child. The increase in child abuse associated with witnessing parental violence is particularly great if both parents were violent. The second row of section E shows that, if both parents were violent, the child abuse rate doubles.

Violence and Other Crime Outside The Family

Section F of Table 1 indicates that witnessing violence between ones parents is associated with violence outside the family as well as with spouse abuse and child abuse. Assaultive behavior by men is from two to three times greater among men who witnessed violence between their parents. For women, the rate is greater than among those who did not witness violence only for women who witnessed attacks on mothers by their fathers.

As for the arrest rate, Table 1 does not adequately present the findings because they are different for men and women. Figure 3 was therefore computed to show these differences, and specifically the fact that the arrest rate is three times higher for men than for women and that the link between growing up in a violent household and criminal behavior as an adult is more direct for men than for women.

CONCLUSIONS

A number of studies have found evidence suggesting that being a witness to violence puts a child at risk of developing social and psychological problems. However, most of these studies used populations of severely battered women and did not control for confounding with other family characteristics. The findings reported in this paper add to existing knowledge because they show such effects for a large and nationally representative sample of American men and women, and because the statistical analysis controlled for a number of variables that are confounded with violence between parents such as physical attacks on the child and poverty. Nevertheless, the results could be due to confounding with variables that were not controlled such as the high level of stress that often precipitates marital violence, or a low level of marital cohesion and love. Moreover, since the data was generated by recall of long past events, there may have been selective memory of violence on the part of those with strained relationships with their parents. On the other hand, the findings may understate the link between

witnessing violence between parents because the analysis did not take into account the severity or the chronicity of the violence witnessed.

Although this paper has demonstrated a link between witnessing marital violence with various psycho-social problems, space limitations did not permit dealing with the important issue of what processes produce the link. Fortunately, that issue is discussed in detail by Jaffee, Wolfe, and Wilson [4] and Merchant and Tomkins, [5] but at least some of the possibilities can be mentioned, including:

* Modeling of coercion and violence that is later acted out when the child is an adult

* Reduced chance to observe and learn negotiation and social competence in general

* Anxiety, terror, and helplessness from observing parents attack each other may have an effect analogous to post traumatic stress syndrome

* Dulled affect and empathy from repeated exposure to cruelty and violence against loved ones

* Impaired ability to nurture and care for a child by parents who are physically attacked by their partner

Whatever the intervening processes, the findings reported in this paper indicate that witnessing parental violence has a wider variety of adverse outcomes than has heretofore been found. It seems reasonable to conclude that being a witness to violence between parents puts a child at risk of a number of serious mental health and other problems, and that this applies to children of all socioeconomic levels and regardless of whether the child has also been attacked by the parents.

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Figure 1

VIOLENCE BETWEEN PARENTS WITNESSED BY THE 1 OUT OF 8 ADULTS WHO REMEMBERED SUCH AN INCIDENT

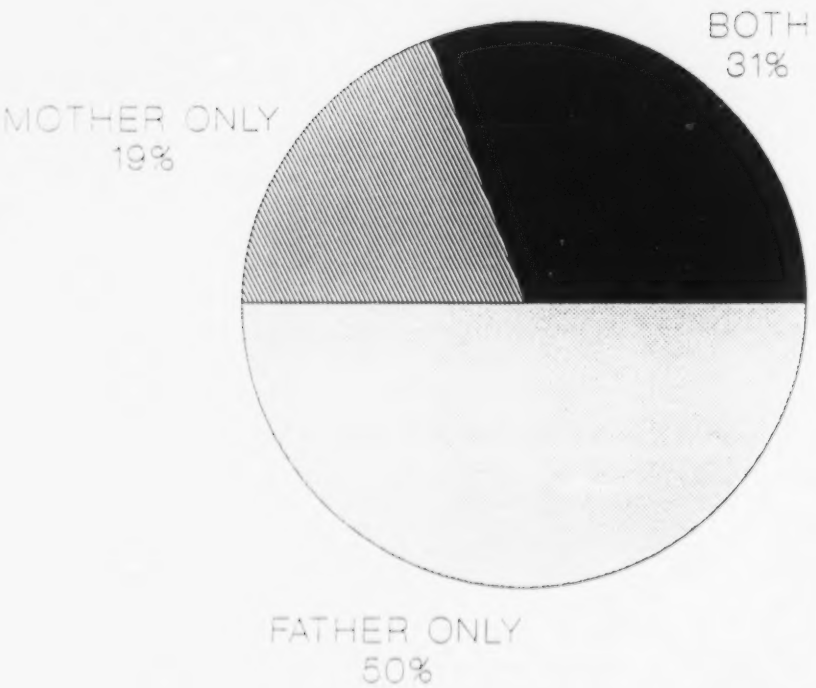

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Figure 2

ASSAULTS ON CHILDREN BY VIOLENCE BETWEEN PARENTS

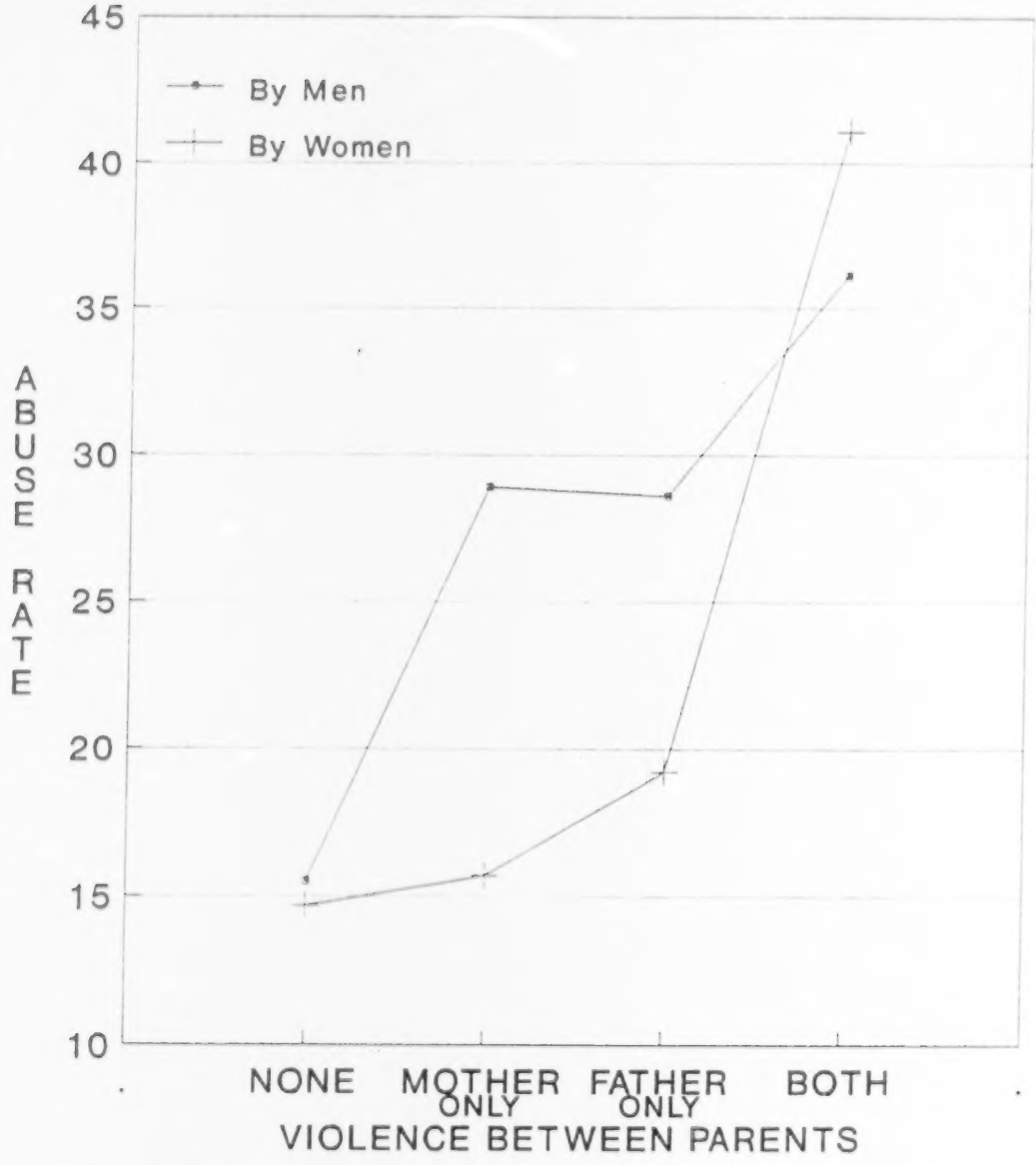

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Figure 3

ARREST RATE
BY VIOLENCE BETWEEN PARENTS

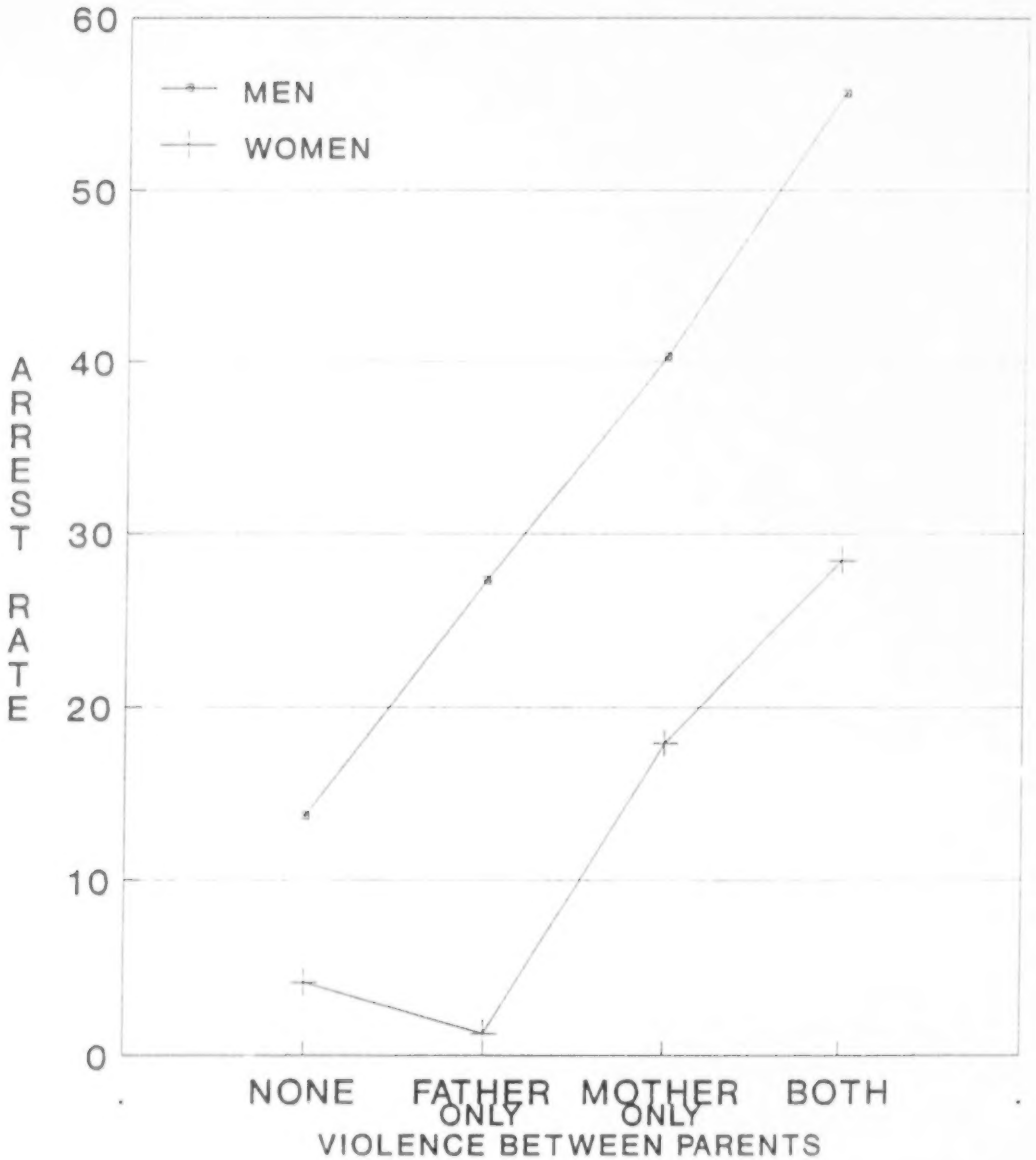

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Table 1. Psychosocial Problems Associated With Witnessing Parental Violence

Problem	Violence by: NEITHER	FATH	MOTH	BOTH	F
Number of cases	4,262	296	48	187	
A. Health Problems					
Health Self-Rating	2.9	2.9	2.8	2.7	3.07*
Days in Bed Due to Illness (Month)	0.4	0.6	0.5	0.7	1.28
Somatic Symptoms Index	1.8	1.8	2.0	2.2	2.48
B. Mental Heath Problems					
Depression Index (% high score)	20.0	31.0	33.6	32.9	15.28***
Perceived Stress Index	3.1	3.7	3.9	3.8	15.82***
C. Drinking And Drugs					
Times drunk past yr: Men	2.82	7.52	3.37	3.66	5.09**
Times drunk past yr: Women	1.02	2.24	1.61	1.62	2.48
Times high on drugs past Yr: Men	3.18	9.0	15.45	4.48	5.86***
Times high on drugs past Yr: Women	1.76	5.0	9.87	1.96	4.29**
D. Marital Conflict And Abuse					
Couple Conflict	2.9	2.8	2.8	2.8	3.27*
Verbal Aggression: Husb to Wife	9.6	13.2	16.3	15.3	15.94***
Verbal Aggression: Wife to Husb	9.9	14.6	16.4	15.4	18.82***
Any Violence: Husband to Wife	10.5	18.3	23.0	22.2	16.32***
Any Violence: Wife to Husband	11.4	21.7	21.4	22.7	16.49***
Severe Violence: Husband to Wife	3.1	4.0	8.4	7.4	6.19***
E. Child Abuse					
Verbal Aggression Toward Child	7.2	8.6	13.4	11.0	10.61**
Severe Assault Against Child	0.6	0.8	1.2	1.2	3.17*
F. Assaults & Other Crime Outside The Family					
Assault by Men per 1,000	35	70	66	121	8.23***
Assault by Women per 1,000	16	37	3	3	3.73*
Arrests per 1,000	9	9	25	38	5.71**

* = p <.05; ** = p <.01; *** = p <.001

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